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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine possible problems in the information dissemination of social aid programs for the poor. Two samples of 141 community leaders and 143 low-income families were selected from a New York county with a high percentage of households in relative poverty and a low percentage in relative affluence. Data gathered from the two samples by personal interview using structured questionnaires included information on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, beliefs and attitudes, and communication behavior. Community leaders were found to be considerably more exposed to newspapers, magazines, and books than were the rural poor. Two obstacles to leader-client communication (through the printed word) were identified--money and motivation. Lack of funds prevented the poor from subscribing to newspapers and magazines, while lack of motivation accounted for their low interest in the content of farm bulletins. It is suggested that these disincentives might be dislodged or offset by the use of cost-free media that have motivational appeal. (CMV)

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Communicating with the Rural Poor

#10

Njoku E. Awa

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Njoku E. Awa

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

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PREFACE

It is impossible to estimate the number of "intervention" and development programs which have failed, though they seem to provide solutions to critical human problems. And although it is extremely difficult to dissect a situation to identify precisely the reason for failure, at least part of it can often be traced to problems in communication. For example, in a Central American country, families were not using a specially created high protein food. While we don't have empirical evidence to tell us why, casual observation suggests that it might have been due to the fact that most of the consumers were illiterate and could not read the directions written on the package explaining how to prepare it properly.

Communication is so commonplace in our interactions that it is too often neglected as an explicit process in development programs. In this paper Njoku Awa shows how people even from the same community, sharing substantially (but not completely) the same culture, may lack some common attributes that make communication problematic.

Dr. Awa, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts at Cornell, originally prepared this article for the Journal of Communication (Volume 12, No. 4, Winter 1974). It is reproduced here with permission of the Journal. We have also added an exchange of letters published by the Journal of Extension relating to the original article.

Royal D. Colle

January 1976

COMMUNICATING WITH THE RURAL POOR

Njoku E. Awa*

Cornell University

The current explosion of knowledge has complicated the role of many Extension professionals. The dissemination of information from research to the clientele isn't easy when the receivers actively seek out this information. This study focuses on problems involved in helping the poor, who seldom seek the information, receive messages through mass media. This study shows that often the message sent to the poor through mass media is understood primarily by the sender and not by the poor.

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What communication barriers exist between professional change agents (Extension and antipoverty personnel, for example) and their rural clients? Do the services provided by these agents accurately reflect the needs of their clients?

These were some of the questions constituting the focus of a study made in Yates County, New York, in 1972.[1] One of the primary objectives of the study was to identify economic, social, situational, and other variables affecting communication between community leaders and the rural poor. Concomitant with the communication problem was the relative apathy of the poor to services created by community leaders to alleviate poverty-related hardships.

A review of pertinent research and literature revealed that messages to antipoverty programs have traditionally been sent through institutionalized

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*Njoku E. Awa is an Assistant Professor in Communication Arts at Cornell University.

[1]Njoku E. Awa, "Some Factors Related to Communication and Social Participation in Low-Income, Low-Density Populations" (Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1973).

channels - newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. None of the studies reviewed made significant comments about the potency of noninstitutionalized channels - newsletters, comic strips, bulletins, and leaflets - in transmitting vital information from change agents to their clients.

Why do change agents rely so heavily on the institutionalized media to communicate with their clientele? There are at least two reasons for this. First, students of development, such as Schraam, Rogers, Rao, and Pye have written quite convincingly about the catalytic role of the mass media in stimulating change in the modernization process.[2] As a result, many people view media exposure as a behavioral indicator of the disposition to adopt new ideas, especially among the members of a client system.

Second, it's often assumed that with some education, cash and motivation, an individual is likely to read newspapers and magazines. It's also assumed that those exposed to these print media are also likely to expose themselves to electronic media (which is what Daniel Lerner calls the "centripetal effect" of media exposure). Despite the fact that these claims haven't been empirically validated, they're nevertheless accepted on intuition by many practitioners.

This article reports findings that indicate that some of the "hard-to-reach" segments of rural populations could be reached through noninstitutionalized channels. The underlying assumption is that some members of this audience may be part of the rural clientele that Extension seeks to reach.

Research Site

As indicated before, the study was made in Yates County, in the Rochester region of central New York. This county was selected for two reasons. First, the funding agency stipulated that the study must be conducted in a rural county. Second, the agency's preference was for counties that were rural and also poor in some measurable ways. Also, previous studies by Cornell researchers had shown that a substantial segment of the

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[2] Wilbur Schramm, Mass Media and National Development (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1964); Everett M. Rogers, Modernization Among Peasants: The Impact of Communication (New York, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969); Y.V. Lakshmana Rao, Communication and Development: A Study of Two Indian Villages (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1966); and Lucian W. Pye, ed., Communication and Political Development (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963).

rural poor in Yates County didn't participate in programs designed to palliate or prevent poverty in the area.[3]

Of the eight counties in the region, Yates has the highest percentage of households in relative poverty (under $3,000 annual income) and the lowest percentage of households in relative affluence ($10,000 and over).[4] In 1969, the Rochester Bureau of Municipal Research found that the cash income of 25.7 percent of Yates County households was under $3,000. Monroe County (the richest) had but 11.7 percent of its households in that category. Also, while the cash income of only 16.0 percent of Yates County households was in the "$10,000 and over" bracket, Monroe County had 40.9 percent of its households in the same category.

A predominantly rural and conservative community, Yates County is sparsely populated and relatively uncontaminated by some of the undesirable effects of modern technology. Because of its low level of industrial activity, the county has high rates of unemployment and underemployment - that is, of poverty. Thus, while many young people in the area can boast of 2 part-time jobs, their combined income from the 2 sources may not amount to more than $5,000 a year.

In spite of the county's relative poverty, its leaders had managed to provide for underprivileged persons all the poverty services found in more affluent counties. At the time this study was made, over 40 agencies in the county were engaged in poverty amelioration services. Some were professional change agencies, others voluntary organizations.

Methodology

Two samples were used in the study: 141 community leaders and 143 low-income families. All respondents were adult whites. Among those designated "community leaders" were town and city officials, Extension and OEO personnel, and religious and educational heads. Within the low-income sample were families on welfare as well as underemployed and unemployed persons.

[3]See Ivette Puerta and Robert Bruce, "Data Collection with Low-Income Respondents" (unpublished report, Cornell University, Department of Extension and Continuing Education, Ithaca, New York, 1972).

[4]Economic Analysis: Regional Summary and Yates County Profile (Rochester, New York: Genesee/Finger Lakes Regional Planning Board, The Rochester Bureau of Municipal Research, 1969).

Data

Data were gathered from the two samples by personal interview using structured questionnaires. These questionnaires were pretested in counties similar to Yates in several important respects.

To obtain the kinds of information necessary to meet the objectives of the study, each interview schedule was subdivided into four parts corresponding to the main hypotheses of the study. The first part was devoted to demographic data, the second dealt with socioeconomic characteristics, the third focused on beliefs and attitudes, while the fourth dealt with respondents' communication behavior. It's the findings derived from the respondents' communication behavior, especially their response and exposure to noninstitutionalized media, that are reported here.

Findings

This study's main aim was to discover sources of communication barriers between community leaders and their low-income clients, and to suggest ways of improving communication between them. To provide useful data, questions were used to determine the potential of noninstitutionalized media (advertising leaflets, solicitations, newsletters and bulletins) for leader-client communication.

Tables 1 and 2 show that both samples were fairly well exposed to these channels. That community leaders read more newsletters than the poor and that the poor read more advertising materials than leaders is understandable, for media exposure is influenced by interest, need, motivation, and access to media, among other factors.

Table 1. Percentage of low-income respondents' exposure to selected noninstitutionalized media

Media	Received and read	Received but seldom read	Received but never read	Other
Advertising pamphlets leaflets, etc.	72.0%	15.4%	8.4%	4.2%
Solicitations	32.9%	23.8%	34.2%	9.1%
Newsletters	55.2%	13.3%	19.5%	12.0%
Farm bulletins	16.8%	14.0%	45.5%	23.7%

Community leaders were found to be considerably more exposed to newspapers, magazines, and books than were the rural poor. The significance of this finding is that messages intended by leaders to reach the poor via newspapers and magazines will reach more of the senders than the intended receivers.

Some of the low-income respondents who claimed they read newspapers on a regular basis turned out to be, in fact, referring to an advertising weekly called the "Penny Saver," produced and distributed free by area merchants. Seventy-two percent of the rural poor and 4 percent of the leaders read this weekly regularly. In addition to advertisements, the "Penny Saver" contains notices of important community news and events and thus provides one widely read means of communicating simple messages to a wide audience.

Table 2. Percentage of community leaders' exposure to selected noninstitutionalized media.

	Received and read	Received but seldom read	Received but never read	Other
Advertising pamphlets leaflets, etc.	42.5%	38.3%	14.2%	5.3%
Solicitations	35.5%	32.6%	15.6%	16.3%
Newsletters	83.0%	5.7%	0.7%	10.6%
Farm Bulletins	44.7%	8.9%	6.7%	39.7%

Implications for Extension

OEO and similar antipoverty agencies aren't the only ones trying to reach and help the rural poor. Extension is one of the foremost agencies that has labored through the years to raise living standards in rural communities.

> Education for action - the kind in which an effective Extension system has no peer - will forever remain the mission and challenge of the Extension Service.[5]

[5] J. Paul Leagans, "Extension Education and Modernization," in Behavioral Change in Agriculture, J. Paul Leagans and Charles P. Loomis, eds. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 109.

For extension to carry out its mission effectively, it must reach its clients in farm and nonfarm populations.

The present data show that the majority of the rural poor regularly read most printed materials they receive. There's enough evidence from the data to warrant the conclusion that low-income families in rural areas are pragmatic in their choice of communication channels and content.

They view, read, and listen to what they perceive to be potentially beneficial and relevant to them. For example, they read advertising materials to compare prices and save money. They read newsletters because they belong to special interest (such as fishing or stamp collecting) clubs that publish newsletters. They read solicitations because it gives them satisfaction to know that the general population recognizes that they too can contribute to charity. Why the respondents in this study didn't read farm bulletins as much as they read the other materials is a matter for speculation.

Based on these data, a few recommendations for Extension communication may be made:

1. Bulletins, newsletters, and short pamphlets will probably be more effective than newspapers and other institutionalized media such as radio and magazines, in reaching low-income families with situationally relevant information. It's possible to build into these media a feedback mechanism to facilitate two-way communication. For example, clients receiving the bulletin or newsletter may be asked to write or call Editor X if they have comments or suggestions to make.
2. When necessary, Extension bulletins should adopt the "Sesame Street" approach to enhance audience receptivity. Especially when new services and programs are established, some imaginative approach to message treatment should be considered in the diffusion campaign.

Some of the farm bulletins received by the low-income sample in Yates County had information that would have benefited any poor individual that cared to read them. However, among those who received farm bulletins, only 16.8 percent read them regularly, while 45.5 percent "never read" any of them.

Conclusions

Executors of the current war on poverty, including Extension programmers, have relied heavily on institutionalized media - print and electronic

- for the dissemination of their information. Available evidence indicates that due to differential access to printed materials, community leaders are considerably more exposed to print media than are low-income families.

Two obstacles to leader-client communication (through the printed word) were identified in the study - money and motivation. Lack of funds prevented the poor from subscribing to newspapers and magazines, while lack of motivation accounted for their low interest in the content of farm bulletins. Perhaps these disincentives can be dislodged or offset by the use of cost-free media that have some motivational appeal.

LETTERS

Awa Article Questions and Answers

Ms. De Slosser's letter

Dear Mr. Awa:

I've just read your article, "Communicating with the Rural Poor," in the Journal of Extension, (Winter, 1974).

Your findings confirm some of my assumptions about non-institutionalized channels of communication. However, I was surprised that you did not try to find out why such a large percentage of the sample did not read farm bulletins as much as they read other materials. You seem to have explored "why" in other questions.

In your recommendations, you suggest that bulletins, newsletters, and short pamphlets will probably be more effective than radio. Can you provide us with data or the basis for your conclusions?

You also suggest the use of a two-way communication between editor and client receiving the newsletter. I do like your ideas. Was this approach used in any of the newsletters or advertising newspapers they received?

Hada I. Lugo-Pagan De Slosser
New York, New York

Professor Awa's Answer

Dear Ms. de Slosser:

Here are some answers to the questions contained in your letter of January 20, 1975.*

1. Why were Yates County low-income respondents inadequately exposed to farm bulletins?

Many of the respondents said they did not receive farm bulletins, nor did they make a personal effort to get these publications. No attempt was made in the study to discover whether any farm bulletins were sent out unsolicited to the rural residents studied, but it would appear that they were not. It should be understood that most of the printed materials read by the poor are distributed free by publishers who want their message to reach its target audience. Thus, The Geneva Shopper, the (Penn Yan) Chronicle Ad-Viser and the Penn Yan Shopping Guide are all distributed free through the mail. The Geneva Shopper's content encompasses a wide range of local, state, national and international happenings, and these are sandwiched between bold-faced ads. Since few people will object to unsolicited information that is efficiently produced and conveniently placed in the mail box, these papers are read by the poor just as enthusiastically and ritualistically as regular newspapers are read by those who can afford their cost.

2. To what extent do low-income families use institutionalized media such as Radio, TV and Newspapers?

One of the objectives of the study was to identify the media exposure habits of families in poverty (or near poverty) in the county studied. It was reasoned that while face-to-face communication is most effective in altering or modifying beliefs, its content is evanescent and its capacity limited. The mass media, while ineffective in changing attitudes, carry a lot of information about many things, and some of them -- the print media -- can preserve information for as long as a reader cares to keep them. The table on the following page shows that most of the low-income respondents read newspapers at least once a week. At such times as they were motivated to read, the majority of them paid more attention to county news and ads than they did to other materials.

Radio and television were the predominant choice of most of these respondents. In terms of media credibility, radio was ranked highest (41.0 percent) for the dissemination of local events, with newspapers coming next (34.0 percent). For national events, television was named the most credible medium (50.4 percent), with radio ranking next to TV (20.0 percent). Despite the dramatic influence of television on viewer preference, radio and newspapers were preferred by respondents for community and state matters. Thus 59.4 percent of the respondents chose radio as their first preference for community and state news while 33.6 percent chose newspapers.

*This is a copy of the author's letter to Ms. de Slosser, not the abridged version published by the Journal of Extension V.XIII, Sept/Oct. 1975.

Percentage Tabulation of the Media Exposure Habits of Low-Income Families in Yates County, New York

Read Newspapers	Daily	At least once a week	At least once a month	Never	No Answer
For county news	21.0	55.9	7.7	9.8	5.6
For state news	28.7	30.8	11.9	22.3	6.3
For world news	27.3	23.7	12.6	29.4	7.0
For farm news	10.5	14.7	14.0	51.7	9.1
For obituaries	25.2	37.7	9.8	19.6	7.7
For sports events	10.5	16.8	9.1	53.1	10.5
For adds	24.5	54.5	2.8	11.2	7.0
View TV					
For county news	28.0	5.6	5.6	51.7	9.1
For state news	75.5	9.1	2.1	7.7	5.6
For world news	73.4	9.8	0.7	9.8	6.3
For farm news	31.5	5.6	4.2	48.9	9.8
For sports events	37.1	7.7	4.2	40.5	10.5
For consumer information	44.0	14.0	5.6	28.7	7.7
For entertainment	86.0	4.2	1.4	4.2	4.2
Listen to Radio					
For county news	68.5	4.9	1.4	11.9	13.3
For state news	56.6	9.1	1.4	18.2	14.7
For world news	55.2	7.7	2.1	21.0	14.0
For farm news	34.3	6.3	0.7	41.9	16.8
For sports events	30.8	4.2	2.1	46.8	16.1
For consumer information	42.6	9.1	1.4	32.3	14.7
For entertainment	60.1	9.8	4.2	12.6	13.3

In matters related to media exposure it is often instructive to verify the amount of time spent by an audience in reading, viewing and listening. Accordingly, the respondents were asked to indicate the number of hours and/or minutes they spent daily on media exposure. The majority of them (57.3 percent) spent about four hours in front of the television screen; 34.2 percent spent about 2 hours listening to radio. Forty percent of the respondents spent between 20 and 30 minutes reading newspapers and other printed materials such as newsletters.

3. Why would bulletins, newsletters, and short pamphlets be more effective than radio for communicating with the rural poor? Are there data supporting this conclusion?

The comparative effectiveness of these types of media was not investigated in the study. The author's conclusion was based on the fact that television and radio programming is rather diffuse and seldom oriented to the specific needs of the rural poor. In contrast, bulletins and other non-commercial media are audience-specific, delivering to a specialized audience information that is situationally relevant. A poor individual may, for instance spend three hours listening to radio without receiving any message relevant to his situation, whereas 20 minutes spent on reading a bulletin with relevant content might prove more beneficial.

4. Was there a two-way communication or feedback mechanism between the editors of the free newspapers and their clientele?

No attempt was made in the study to verify this. However, many of the ads in the free newspapers were small personal notices sponsored by readers and their neighbors in the community, or by area merchants. These were written in a manner that could evoke response from readers or foster interaction between source and receiver.

Some recommendations were made on the basis of the results of the research. Among these were two that are related to change agent-client communication:

1. First, because of the incongruity between the content of poverty programs and the stated needs of the rural poor, it might be necessary to establish discussion forums aimed at multiplying upward-communication channels between change agencies and their clientele.

2. Second, there are some clusters of factors related to acceptance and rejection of anti-poverty programs that have not been adequately identified, and since the identification of these factors will lead to improvement or abandonment of some services, it would be instructive to create feedback channels through which the attitudes of low-income families can be monitored. Again, this is a function which the more established media (TV, radio, magazines and newspapers) cannot perform adequately, given their goals and organizational philosophy.

Njoku E. Awa
Cornell University
Ithaca, NY

Journal of Extension, Volume XIII, September/October, 1975

letters

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In your recommendations, you suggest that bulletins, newsletters, and short pamphlets will probably be more effective than radio. Can you provide us with such data or the basis for your conclusions?

You also suggest the use of a two-way communication between editor and client receiving the newsletter. I do like your ideas. Was this approach used in any of the newsletters or advertising newspapers they received?

HADA I. LUGO-PAGAN DE SLOSSER
New York, New York

Dear Ms. de Slosser:

Many of the respondents said they did not receive farm bulletins, nor did they make a personal effort to get these publications. Most of the printed materials read by the poor is distributed free by publishers or advertising and shopper newspapers.

These newspapers are read by the poor just as enthusiastically and ritualistically as regular newspapers are read by those who can afford their cost.

The comparative effectiveness of bulletins, newsletters, short pamphlets, and radio wasn't investigated in the study.

No attempt was made to verify a two-way communication or feedback mechanism between the editors of the free newspapers and their clientele.

Thank you for your penetrating questions. I hope that the data furnished will shed some light on the problem of communicating with the poor.

NJOKU E. AWA
Ithaca, New York

Note: Awa's letter to de Slosser included more data and tables not printed here.

More About New Format . . .

Congratulations to you for the big improvement in the *Journal*. Many agents have expressed their opinions—all in favor of the new size, color, and format. It really is a much more impressive journal than we had previously.

NETTIE RUTH BROWN
President, NAEHE
St. Augustine, Florida

First, I appreciate the "new look" of the *Journal*, and especially the "forum" addition. In fact, I read the entire issue—whereas in the past, it was somewhat a "hit and miss" situation.

Likewise, to me, the articles were more Extension and practical oriented, whereas past articles were more academic and research oriented. I believe this direction desirable for a useful Extension journal.

O. W. CUNDIFF
Blacksburg, Virginia